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Interviewer: Hello, my name is Alicia Mittelman; I'm a curator at the Estes Park Museum. Today is April 2, 2014. We are at the Estes Park Museum about to interview Paige Claassen for the Estes Valley Mountaineering Oral History Project, a joint project between the Estes Valley Library and the Estes Park Museum. [This interview is also available in video format, filmed by Brian Brown. The interview was transcribed by Tom Willimas with assistance from Alicia Mittelman.]

Could you state your full name please?

Paige Claassen: My name is Paige Claassen.

Interviewer: When and where were you born?

Paige Claassen: I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1990.

Interviewer: When did you move to Colorado?

Paige Claassen: I moved to Colorado when I was two years old in 1992.

Interviewer: When did your family come to Estes Park?

Paige Claassen: My family moved from Parker, Colorado to Estes Park when I was between third and fourth grade.

Interviewer: What was your first introduction to climbing?

Paige Claassen: It's kind of a funny story, I was really bad at all of the activities I tried, I was in the swim program for a while, I tried soccer, I tried saxophone and my parents were just like, "We have to find something that she's good at because this is tough." So they took me to the climbing gym, they saw an advertisement in the newspaper. At that time it was the gym downtown and I just loved it right away. That was kind of my thing from then on and I started in an after school program and began competing right away. Within my first year I went to national championships in Michigan and I just loved competing and it took off from there.

Interviewer: So your first introduction to climbing was at the climbing gym on Elkhorn Avenue. Do you remember that first day in there, was it overwhelming?

Paige Claassen: I remember the first day in the gym, I tried the beginner wall where they started one off on the top ropes and I loved that but I really wanted to try the wall with the roof. They were like, "Well we don't really put beginners on that." But I was eager and I wanted to try and of course I didn't make it over the roof. I wasn't afraid of falling from the beginning so would just

swing around. I think even maybe my cousins were even there that day. So it was just like a fun family day of everyone playing and that's kind of what climbing was to me at that time, was playtime and it still kind of is to some extent.

Interviewer: You mentioned getting into competitive climbing right away. Can you explain what climbing in a competition is?

Paige Claassen: Sure, in a climbing competition it's not based on speed, it's actually based on difficulty. So there will be really challenging routes and ideally they want one person to reach the top and everyone else to fall, lower and lower. Your goal is to get as high as you can but most likely you'll fall at some point. For me, I began competing in the after school program, so it was just against kids in Estes. I remember tying for first with some boys and that was like a big confidence boost for me in where it kind of became this game. I was very competitive both with myself and with other people and that motivated me to travel throughout the country and later throughout the world to compete. I liked the pressure that I felt from competitions, both for myself and from what I perceived to be from the audience, even though in reality they don't really care how you do and my parents are going to love me regardless of how I placed. I liked having to perform in front of a group of people but at climbing, not singing or something like that that I'd had bad experiences with in the past.

Interviewer: I see, so to be clear, you were climbing on behalf of the Estes Park Climbing Team?

Paige Claassen: In the national competitions?

Interviewer: Yeah, when you were really young.

Paige Claassen: Climbing's a very individual sport so especially at that time, people weren't really climbing for a team, you just climbed as an individual. So I practiced with the Estes Park Climbing Team but then at competitions I was really just representing myself as all of the other kids were. Now competitions are still very individual but kids do compete for their team and the team also gets a score, but it's still very individual.

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Interviewer: What was training like with the team?

Paige Claassen: Training with the team was like just hanging out with your friends. It was really fun, it was social. I was the youngest person on the team by quite a bit so I had this great group of mentors who were very kind in putting up with me because I think I had a lot of energy. It was just this really supportive group of people and what I've kind of always loved about climbing is that it's sort of a place where people who didn't fit in elsewhere can go. Maybe they didn't like team sports or something didn't

work out in other places and they landed in climbing because you're responsible for both your successes and your failures. So it's very based on self-motivation and being an individual. So I think that's attractive to a lot of people. But despite that individuality that you have in climbing, being part of the team was just fun and you had coaches who would bring games that we played to train. It was like a little family and that's why climbing's really cool for me.

Interviewer: You traveled pretty far for some of these comps, you mentioned going to Michigan. Where else were some of the competitions?

Paige Claassen: Those first few years I competed in Nationals in Michigan, in Virginia, California, Oregon and I was really blessed to have a family who could support my travels and my family's always been a big part of my life in climbing. Both my parents and my younger brother, who he climbs as well, were able to travel with me across the nation and across the world. So that was something that I was really fortunate to have was a family who could support that and who was excited to see me compete and to cheer me on.

Interviewer: I can't imagine that those competitions always took place during school breaks. Did you have to balance travel with school here in Estes Park?

Paige Claassen: Definitely. When it's the youth program they actually do a pretty good job of making Nationals and world championships in the summer because it's all kids competing. But then as you get into adult competitions and local competitions they're on the weekends, they're far away and so there is that balance of school and climbing. Especially in high school and later in university it was difficult and I think my senior year of high school I missed over 60 days of school. So it was again that self-motivation where you have to be self-motivated to train as a climber but you also have to make up for all your school work and that was hard at times.

Interviewer: Who were your coaches in Estes Park and what are some of the things that they taught you?

Paige Claassen: My first coach in Estes was Jim, he was part of the after school program and so he really introduced me to climbing. I remember I was really afraid of lead climbing when I first started and falling on lead. So I remember a time in the gym where Jim had me climb up and then I got to the top and he gave me this really big fall that I wasn't expecting and that kind of just snapped something in my head that, "Ok, I'm safe, I didn't want that fall but here I am and I can do that again and again." So I built up that comfort level to falling. I also had Mike Caldwell, Stephen Greenway and Michelle Hurni as coaches throughout my time on the Estes Park Climbing Team. Each of those coaches played a really important role in my climbing life and learning to compete and be a good competitor. In learning to use good footwork, motivation, eating well, having fun, getting

along with team members. All of those things that you do build up in team sports, there's a different dynamic in climbing. Each of those coaches was so supportive and just a really positive role in my life and it's fun to keep up with them today too and to be able to follow each other and look back on those times that we had together.

Interviewer: It must to be really rewarding for them to see your progress too. Can you recall how old you were or what year that was that you began leading in the gym?

Paige Claassen: I began climbing when I was nine and I think I began leading maybe when I was ten, so pretty soon. It was in the old gym downtown so that's something that's really important to climbing, whether you're inside or outside, you need to be able to lead. It's really good for your head too because it forces you into this whole other mental level where you have to be thinking about safety and where the rope is and what your fall might be like. So that was an important time for me.

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Interviewer: Then at some point you transitioned into climbing outdoors. When was that and what compelled you to climb outside?

Paige Claassen: I had tried climbing outside quite a few times when I was really young, our coaches would take us up to the Thumb on Prospect Mountain or out to Lumpy Ridge, to Jurassic Park and honestly it never really clicked for me. I was like, "I like the gym and I like competing." That's kind of embarrassing now as someone who now loves outdoors and climbing outside. But when I was young the gym was where I was comfortable and outside you had to eat gross power bars all day and you had to wait in line for top ropes and you had to wear a helmet and all of this stuff that when you're little isn't cool. So we went out a few times and it was fun but it wasn't my thing and my parents are also big into the outdoors, they don't climb but we would go on family hikes. I think those always involved a lot of complaining about, "Oh, we have to go on a hike again." But then my family went with Stephen Greenway to Shelf Road and later to Rifle, both in Colorado. Those trips taught me that climbing could be fun. At that point I was able to lead. I could try routes that were physically challenging to me which I think really made me climbing outside. Where it wasn't just doing laps on rocks, it was actually trying hard and that's what I love about climbing is pushing myself. I like approaching moves and thinking there impossible and then having to work on them over and over until you can do them and then you can do the whole route. So those experiences in some places that weren't at home, I think also allowed me to kind of get out of my little zone here and to try harder.

Interviewer: When did those trips take place to Shelf Road and to Rifle?

Paige Claassen: Those trips took place when I was about fifteen or sixteen, so it was later in high school when I decided to really climb outside more and start trying hard projects. Then when I was about nineteen or twenty I decided that I didn't want to compete anymore. At that point I had competed for ten or eleven years all throughout the world and I had loved it but to really do your best in those world competitions you need to train in the gym all the time. Moreover you need to train in Europe where they have these very specific gyms and that wasn't where I wanted to spend my time and to spend so much money to go to Europe for these competitions and you're climbing for like ten minutes for one trip to Europe. So that didn't quite seem worth it to me and my passion for climbing outside was growing. So I just made this decision where I don't want to straddle both and be so-so at both competition climbing and outdoor climbing but I really want to focus on climbing outside.

Interviewer: Does the pressure grow in the competitive world as you get a little older?

Paige Claassen: I definitely think the pressure grows as you get older. When I was young I never got nervous. I loved the pressure but then as you do better and better you're kind of expected to do well all the time. And again, it's that thing where it's really personal pressure because those people watching and those people cheering for you, they're proud of you either way. They don't care how you do, they want you to do well but I think it was really this personal pressure where I had done well in competitions and so I knew what I was capable of and I needed to uphold that level at every competition. I think another thing for me was that as the competition scene was growing and climbing is such a small community, the dynamic between girls changes and it got kind of catty where these are your friends, they're the only other women around you climbing but they're also your competitors. So to maintain those friendships sometimes was really difficult. I had, not a falling out but some tension with one of my closest friends over a competition because we were getting to that same level. Both of us kind of realized what was going on at the same time and transitioned our focus back to climbing outside and now we're really close friends again. It's a strange dynamic in such a small community where girls can really get in each other's faces. That wasn't something that I wanted to be a part of but also knowing that it's part of competition that you're competing against maybe your friends.

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Interviewer: That's a lot to juggle at that age and what's interesting to me is with some of the older men that we have interviewed, often times there's one female or a couple at the scene and really we haven't yet heard of there being more women there and their dynamics.

Paige Claassen: I bet, I'm interested to hear about their stories too.

Interviewer: So then when you began climbing outside, what were some of your initial projects in the Estes Park area?

Paige Claassen: Initially when I began climbing outside I was going to real sport areas like Rifle that had tons of bolts, things weren't run out, it was very comfortable. So that kind of bridged the gap between the gym and the crag. That was a nice transition because it allowed me to learn how to be safe, how to climb outside where especially you respect the environment, be a good ambassador for the sport. Then as I began to climb outside more and more my focus kind of drifted back to Estes and I realized, I grew up in this place where there is rock everywhere. When I was going to school down at C.U. [University of Colorado – Boulder] I didn't really have time to travel to too many different places so my objectives were more focused at home. One place that really attracted my attention was the Monastery out by Glenn Haven. The first day I went there I tried a route called the Quickening, it's 13c I think and I just loved it. I loved the style there, it was really thin and technical which is something that not many modern climbers really like. A lot of the younger climbers now like really steep caves, really powerful climbing, really physical climbing. I was still attracted to those thin technical routes and that was what the Monastery was. The Monastery is in this beautiful location where in the Vestibule you're located in this little corridor that perfectly lines up Longs Peak. There's not many people up there, you are kind of with just with your group of friends and you have this gorgeous view of Longs. That was a really special time for me spending time at the Monastery because I was kind of in my home area but I was actually having fun outside which was a newish experience for me. I decided that I wanted to work on some of the other routes up there and I began working on Grand Old Opry and it took about, I think four to five weeks for me to do that. In the beginning I was really just playing on the route. I wanted to try the moves, I thought, "If nothing else I'll get stronger." As I played around I couldn't do a lot of the moves but it sort of felt possible. I remember a conversation with a friend in the car where they said, "Do you want to do this route?" I thought about it and I said, "Yes, I do and I'm going to do it." At that point I absolutely knew that I would finish the route because I had said it out loud. As soon as I had made that commitment verbally I couldn't let myself back out. So I continued to work on Grand Old Opry and it was the traditional process of projecting where at first you're having fun and you're making progress each day. Then you begin to make downward progress and then you're frustrated and then you think, "Oh, I can never do this, this is impossible for me I'm not strong enough." It's this whole mental battle which is really quite miserable but it's what I love. So it's this strange relationship of going through all those emotions and then in the end conquering them and knowing that it was worth it. When I did Grand Old Opry, it was a turning point for my climbing because I realized what I was capable of and that if I put enough time and effort into something I could do things that didn't feel possible. I could do moves that

after 10 or 20 tries I still couldn't even fathom sticking that hold, but if I kept working on it, it would come together. So the Monastery definitely holds a special place in my heart and after Grand Old Opry I went back to complete the other routes up there. There's still a 5.12 gear route that I have to do, so kind of my goal this summer is to get more comfortable placing gear and that's my last route in the Vestibule.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what it's called?

Paige Claassen: I don't even know the name of the 5.12.

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Interviewer: That's ok. Those are really remarkable for me because just a week prior, Tommy Caldwell was sitting right where you are and he talked about climbing Grand Old Opry and how initially he thought it was impossible too. He gave it a year or even two, before he returned to that area to really give it a good effort, and you were the first female to do it. [Paige Claassen – Yes] Did you think about him and Mike Caldwell since you knew them personally?

Paige Claassen: Definitely, Tommy played a pretty important role in my life through climbing because Mike was my coach when I was young and so I remember Tommy coming into the gym to sign posters for our team. Honestly I was so young that climbing celebrities, I just wanted to climb on the wall. So there's no like being star struck or whatever because I was almost too young for that. But I remember having this poster of Tommy Caldwell on To Bolt and I was like, "He is Spiderman because he is climbing a wall where there's no holds, he's just sticking to the drywall." So I kind of remembered walking around like my house after that and looking at blank walls and being like, "That's Tommy Caldwell on To Bolt or Not to Be." That was the one route that in my adult life I was like, "I have to do that route because of that poster of Tommy." Then in years following that, to be able to revisit some of Tommy's routes and especially Grand Old Opry is really cool because he made such an impact on climbing in Colorado. So many of the hardest sport routes here are Tommy's routes. That's really cool, there's a list of, he has the most impressive tick list in rock climbing in my opinion because he does so many different aspects of the sport. And no else has really done that where they have impressive bouldering ascents and sports climbing and gear routes and alpine climbs and big walls. So now that I can actually appreciate all that Tommy's done it's so cool to follow his ascents and look back on his history through climbing.

Interviewer: I'm hoping you can expand a little bit on the process where in Grand Old Opry you said there's this natural progression of working on it, getting through some of the moves and then kind of going backwards, almost regressing. How do you not give up on it and walk away?

Paige Claassen: I think part of it is my personality, I'm very determined and I feel like I can kind of tell when I can do something and it might not be easy or come quickly or come as easily and quickly as I want it to but giving up feels like defeat to me and I think in climbing where, especially when you're not competing, you're just competing against yourself so if you give up, if you walk away, you're losing the game. There's nothing wrong with that at times, there's times when you need to walk away and I've done that from other projects where it just becomes self-deprecating and you're just defeated over and over. You're worn down and you need to step back and try something else. But with almost every hard route I've worked on there's been that emotional roller coaster and I've talked to women about it, I've talked to men about it and I think that for both men and women it can be very emotional. There's lots of people who think like crying at the cliff is ridiculous and it does have ridiculousness to it, but there would be times when I was so frustrated that I would sit at the bottom of the cliff just sobbing like a small child. There's no excuses for that but that was my way of expressing frustration. Some people will fall and scream and kick and throw their shoes, but mine was just like curling into this ball and feeling defeated. But once you get over that and you look back up at the route, and I feel like I try and choose routes that are beautiful and inspire me beyond just, "I want to climb this difficulty." So when you see those holds and look back at the route's history and how many people have tried it and couldn't overcome it, or didn't continue to try it, it just kind of fuels your desire. So for me it was an important goal that I wanted to achieve and I wasn't willing to give up on that.

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Interviewer: Are there any other areas in Estes Park that holds such a special place to you like the Monastery does?

Paige Claassen: As of now the Monastery is where I've spent the most time around Estes. I've spent a bit of time up at Wizard's Gate which is an area that Jonathan Siegrist developed and I'd like to finish off some of those routes. I think that's a really cool area that's a bit unique to Estes because it actually has some slightly steeper climbs like the Monastery. A lot of the climbs around Estes are the more slabby vertical and there's a lot of gear routes which is something that I haven't really been into yet. Like I said, that's something that I want to work on this summer because as of now I'm a sport climber and I clip bolts but I would really like to learn to place gear and be comfortable placing gear to actually try hard trad routes. I think that will be a point where I can really explore more of Estes. I would love to do the Diamond. Tommy's established some really cool hard routes up

that but before I even think about that I think I just need to try an easy one and do the Diamond. So I have some goals around Estes that I haven't explored yet but it's really fun to be able to think of what's in my back yard. Previously I was looking to areas like Rifle or Spain and France where there's sport climbing havens. I wouldn't call Estes a sport climbing haven per say, but there are so many opportunities that I want to take advantage of in the future.

Interviewer: Do you ever think about route development?

Paige Claassen: I have thought a bit about route development and I've asked a few friends to show me how to bolt and so I've done some bolting on river rocks in the back yard just to practice. I think that's a really cool opportunity as well because there aren't any women developing. That's something that I would like to try in the future and it definitely requires some mentorship because you don't want to just go out there and go for it. But that is something that is attractive to me and you just have to find the right line, or for me I would want to find the right line that is inspiring and feels worth that time and effort. Then to be able to learn to appreciate the route developers of the past that have done so much to develop our sport. I think that's really important especially with this younger generation because I think a lot of times, myself included, we just climb because it's fun and we really don't think about all the effort that others put into developing these routes. I don't think you can fully appreciate that until you do it yourself. Almost more than anything I want to try bolting so that I can appreciate and thank those who came before me.

Interviewer: You probably didn't really run into the controversial issue of bolting back when it was coming up and the Caldwell's for example took some heat for it. So did you ever get any flack for being a sport climber specifically?

Paige Claassen: Not exactly, I remember climbing at even some of the smaller home gyms in Estes and everyone had stickers that, what did they say? "Trad is rad and sport climbing is neither." I remember when I was little just being like, "Sport climbing is climbing, that's what climbing is." I think that's kind of the ignorance of the younger generation. Is like, "This is what the sport is," and we fail to recognize all the other facets of the sport. But no, I haven't received flack personally for being a sport climber but I haven't been a developer so I haven't been involved in a lot of those conflicts. There are so many important moral issues to consider in developing routes, whether you are bolting or just establishing new gear routes. Is it safe and have you cleaned it enough and to what extent can you clean without manufacturing. Can gear be placed here or should bolts be here to make it safe. There's so many questions involved that you do have to be really careful and that's where I really want someone who's experienced to kind of guide me through those beginning steps because it's important to not just go blast bolts everywhere.

Interviewer: Especially in Rocky Mountain National Park, people probably have to think about it even more so because it requires hand drilling, a lot of work.

Paige Claassen: Exactly, which is a whole nother story.

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Interviewer: You spoke a little bit to some of those generational differences. I know that you've thought and spoke and written about falling and some of the traditional climbers here went through rock climbing when there was an ethic that the leader doesn't fall or if a route is too hard, then you just down climb but then this generation kind of rise in the ranks through indoor climbing and then some of the moderates outdoors first. There's an ethic now where it's changed where falling is ok. Can you speak to that a little bit?

Paige Claassen: Sure, I'm definitely part of this generation where falling is not only ok, it's very necessary, to climb at a certain level. It depends what you're looking for in the evolution of the sport. If you're looking for evolution in grades and difficulty, falling is a huge piece. No one's ever going to climb harder if they're not falling. Not even just falling but there's this whole thing of; you're basically aid climbing when you're projecting a sport route. You're clipping into the wall, you're pulling on draws, you're using a stick clip to get the next bolt in some cases. I don't really like doing that but it's kind of aid climbing. So it's very strange that especially a lot of younger climbers I think would say, "Oh I would never aid climb, like that's such a ridiculous part of the sport." But that's what we're doing. I think you kind of have to bring it back to this point that, we're all climbing rocks which is a little bit silly in itself. There's so many different means of doing that, so it's like you choose your method of getting up the rock. But for me that's why I almost have trouble getting into trad climbing is because falling is so ingrained in climbing for me. I'm really comfortable falling because I'm falling on bolts. So to kind of switch that mental piece where you can't really fall in some cases. That's really hard for me because I like the challenge of just throwing yourself at moves and knowing you're coming off the wall, but maybe your goal is to just get an inch higher each time or for your hand to touch the hold or whatever it is and knowing that you're going to fall. Then slowly working up to hopefully not falling and then definitely not falling. It's a strange process.

Interviewer: Would the example of the Grand Old Opry, which is a 5.14c, falling was a big part of accomplishing.

Paige Claassen: Definitely, with Grand Old Opry, one of the reasons I really like it is because I wouldn't say it's run out but you can't reach between bolts. So you actually have to climb between bolts which I find really cool because in a lot of sport areas you can just pull yourself up routes so it doesn't matter how hard you climb, you can get to the top of a 5.14. But with

Grand Old Opry, if you couldn't do the crux move, you're not trying the rest of it. I did work it on top rope a few times before I did it on lead because I couldn't even attempt the moves. They were so hard for me that leading wasn't really even an option or I couldn't try. I do remember taking some really big falls on Grand Old Opry where you have to skip a bolt at one point in the middle of the crux and then jump for this big top and then you can clip below you. Taking that fall is pretty exciting, you just have to get comfortable with it and trust your belayer and know that you're safe and if you don't go for it you're never going to catch that next hold. So it's a strange balance of you can't really be afraid because if you're afraid then you're more likely to fall because you're not committing and I like that aspect as well.

14:12

Interviewer: You said, "A little bit, that climbing rocks is a little silly by its nature." I can think of some times where I've heard you take topics or themes from climbing and apply it in a broader sense that appeals to more people beyond climbers. Like, "Falling isn't failing." Can you talk about that?

Paige Claassen: Sure. Climbing to me is a very selfish sport because we're just doing it for ourselves and maybe if you're a developer you're contributing to the community, the climbing community which is still a small group of people. I think what's really cool about climbing is that it can relate to other parts of life and climbing has helped me as an individual so much. When I was nine and started climbing I had no confidence, I couldn't even talk to people really because I was so shy. There's actually a story where I won a bicycle in fourth grade through a raffle and they called my name over the intercom and I went to the school office crying because I was humiliated that they had announced my name over the intercom. But climbing gave me that confidence where I am good at something; if I work hard at something it can become attainable. That's a message I do want to share with other people, is that persistence and determination and working hard will pay off. That's something that got me through high school when I was missing a lot of school. It got me through university when classes are hard and exams are hard and you're still trying to balance climbing and traveling. Climbing just taught me that the effort I put in is the result I will get out of it and that you will have to make sacrifices along the way. Especially as a teenager I didn't party, that wasn't my thing, I wanted to climb and I needed to go to school. So that left not a lot of time for a social life, but that was a sacrifice that I was willing to make. I think in all aspects of life we kind of have to prioritize and we have to choose what's important and where we're going to put our hard work in. So that is a topic that I like to share in some of my talks and also climbing is just a great metaphor for life. You are overcoming obstacles, we're climbing up to the top, we're falling along the way. Maybe you're trying to get into school or interview for a new job and it might not work out the first time. You might

keep falling but knowing that those are steps on the ladder to reaching that goal. Without those failures, maybe you're not pushing yourself hard enough. That's kind of a theme that I've tried to live by, is that if I'm succeeding all the time I'm probably not trying hard enough.

Interviewer: With you work with nonprofits and climbing objectives, what do you envision for your future? What would you like to see happen?

Paige Claassen: It's kind of hard to envision the future. I feel like I'm still so young that's it's so hard to decide what you want to be when you grow up and I struggled with that a lot in university, what I would major in because that would determine the rest of my life. Now I realize that people change career paths when they are forty or fifty and that's fine. But right now I just finished up a world tour where I was climbing in different countries to raise money for nonprofit organizations. That taught me a lot about how I can use climbing in a positive way, where climbing itself might be this somewhat selfish activity but it's like people running marathons to raise money for breast cancer awareness. You can kind of use what you're good at and if people want to watch videos or read media and then you can slip another message in there to inform people about the amazing work that so many people are doing around the world and about those who really need help. Throughout that trip I really learned what's out there in the world, about different cultures and how people can manage to keep such a positive attitude despite their circumstances. That taught me so much and that's something that I would like to keep expanding on in the future and work with different organizations that especially help younger kids because, like I said, climbing taught me so much when I was young and it gave me that confidence to push myself and to be driven. I think that when you're young you can chase after those dreams that might seem silly to other people but if that's what motivates you each day, it's worth it. Climbing might not be accessible to all little kids around the world, it's not an accessible sport but if there's something that they love and they're passionate about it's important to use that as motivation to

19:35 [End of Part B.]

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try hard in school and to surround yourself with the right people and work towards those goals. So I think there are a lot of people out there starting organizations with even local gyms in the U.S. that are helping kids to kind of find out who they are, because that's hard when you are young. There's a lot of pressure to, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Like act the right way and be the right person, climbing's something that can kind of help you find that.

Interviewer: During your world tour you coupled the fund raising and kind of experiencing these cultures with some climbing and you did some really bold objectives in these places that are really not traveled to so much by foreign climbers. What were some of the highlights of your climbing around the world?

Paige Claassen: As far as the climbing goes, it was really cool to be in so many unique places. That was kind of the goal of choosing somewhat different locations was for each month the rock to be very different, the objective to be very different, to always be trying new things. At times that was really hard because maybe you're going from one area that requires a ton of endurance and finger strength and then next month you're trying this really short route where you need a lot of bouldering power. So it's hard to adapt my body to that each month. But there were definitely some moments that stood out. I got to do my first first ascent in South Africa, which this would be even strange to some of the other people you've interviewed, but I didn't bolt it. One of the local guys in South Africa bolted it and he was like, "I'd really like you to try this route because it seems your style, you like Smith Rock and you like that technical style of climbing and this is too hard for me and I want you to try it." And I did and I think it was the most beautiful route I've ever tried. That was again one of those times where at moments it felt impossible but I really wanted to do it and ended up doing the first ascent of that route in South Africa. I think it's about 14a but I'd like other people to go test it out too.

Interviewer: It's a 5.14a, can you pronounce it?

Paige Claassen: Yes, Digital Warfare, it's a 5.14a in South Africa. Some other moments that stood out were in Italy, I did a slab that was graded 14b, only one guy had done it before and no one really likes slab climbing anymore it seems. But I love slabs, they're so much fun. Again, it's like a mental puzzle and in Italy it was raining almost all month so the slab was wet a lot of the time and it was just gross conditions. In the end it came together on the second to last day of the trip and at that point I had totally given up. One of my mantras in climbing has been, "If you keep trying and you believe you can do it, you can." Italy was different because I had totally given up and I didn't believe I could do it at all. I was just trying so that I didn't have excuses on the way home, I couldn't say, "Oh if I had only tried it once more." Then suddenly it came together in like this miracle moment when it was like lightly raining outside and not good slab conditions but I had put all that effort in and I knew how to do the moves. And so again, you kind of, throughout your life you have these little moments that the world, or for me God, reminds me that like why I'm there, why I'm doing this. That was one of those times where it was like, "Just keep trying."

Interviewer: Do you think being raised in this environment in Estes Park lent itself well at all as preparation for the variety of climbing you would do around the world?

Paige Claassen: I definitely think that growing up in Estes inspired the style of climbing that I like because despite the fact that when I was young and didn't like slab climbing up on Lumpy Ridge as a ten year old, it kind of engrained this history of climbing in me that I wanted to continue learning about as an adult. I think it's also a lot of the things my coaches taught me through climbing, the importance of foot work and it wasn't all about being the strongest climber you could be, it wasn't all about having huge biceps but it was about learning good technique and actually being a good climber and not just a strong climber. That's something that's stuck with me and I'm appreciative to my coaches for and now I'm excited to be able to apply around Estes for the rest of my life in climbing.

05:09

Interviewer: Are there any other people you looked up to? You had talked about Tommy, are there any other examples of climbers you admire?

Paige Claassen: The climbers that I've always really admired are the people I'm climbing with every day. I think that's something that's really cool is that it doesn't have to be the strongest climber in the world to inspire you. It's my everyday partners that try hard no matter what the grade is and that push themselves and that encourage me. Those are the people that inspire me to continue climbing. So there weren't a ton of celebrity climbing figures in my life that motivated me to train harder, but it was more the people around me. The other kids on my team, my coaches and my parents, even though they don't climb, because they were just so supportive of this thing that meant a lot to me and in that way it meant a lot to them. It really bound our family together too because we were able to take some really special trips together and to share this activity that takes you outside and it takes you to strange places. And to be able to share that with your climbing partners or whoever you are around is really fun.

Interviewer: Did you ever have any close calls climbing outside?

Paige Claassen: I don't have any great stories about close calls. I think that probably comes from being a sport climber and starting in the gym and that's something I'm really thankful for is that I learned the safety rules of climbing in the gym where it was a very controlled environment. I was learning from people who knew what they were doing at a very high level. So I had cleaned routes in the gym plenty of times before I ever did outside. So I'm thankful that I haven't had those close calls outside. But a lot of it is doing those things that seem like there're for beginners where you're checking each other's knots and you're asking if your belayer's ready. And that doesn't seem cool all the time but it's so important and I think we've seen a lot of really tragic climbing accidents over the past years that could have been prevented. That's something that no matter how strong you are or how long you've been climbing, it's always worth to check out your

equipment and what's around you. So that's something I try and do and hope that I can continue to do.

Interviewer: Good, I'm glad to hear that. Can you think of any challenges you've had to overcome to get to where you are today?

Paige Claassen: I mean I think every day in climbing is a challenge in a way because you're always presented with a new opportunity or a new challenge and each route is different and forces you to push yourself in different ways. So you're never just honing in on this one skill. There's always so many things you have to focus on. So that's a challenge in itself. I went through a time when I was maybe sixteen or so and I was like, "I'm going to quit climbing, I'm sick of this, I don't want to do it anymore and I'm going to play basketball." My dad was like, "Oh gosh, this is going to be terrible," because I was so bad at sports with a ball or any other sports really. But I remember spending a few weeks like practicing basketball in the driveway and I didn't climb. After a few weeks it was like, "Alright, I'm ready to climb again." That taught me that taking rests is not a bad thing. Climbing's a sport where you're constantly practicing and you're constantly pushing your body but it's really important to rest when you feel injured or unmotivated. I think there's nothing wrong with taking time to do other things because climbing's also a very consuming activity where kind of your whole life can start to revolve around this one thing. What you eat, what you do, what you talk about and to remember that there's so many other cool things in life besides climbing is something that I've definitely had to learn over the years.

09:43

Interviewer: As a sponsored athlete, is that encouraged or frowned upon by your sponsors? How does that relationship work?

Paige Claassen: I'm really fortunate to work with brands who, they're kind of like my family and they're very understanding and they're in it because they love it. So my sponsors are very supportive of, "If you're feeling injured or you need rest, go for it." I don't think that all athletes have that same experience, but I'm really thankful to my sponsors for all that they've helped me with and just for the flexibility. You as an athlete know what you need and you have to do that and you have to take care of yourself.

Interviewer: Have you Paige observed any changes in the climbing community in all the years that you've been climbing?

Paige Claassen: There's definitely been a lot of changes in the climbing community. I think in youth climbing especially. When I started climbing there were a few defined teams but it was different. The teams were having fun and you were training but there wasn't pressure from your team and you weren't being like beaten to exhaustion. I see some of these youth teams now and

it's intense. In some cases I can't really imagine having a coach who is riding you that hard. I know that's how it is in a lot of sports. For me I like being able to push myself and my coaches pushed me but they were also very supportive. Some of these young kids who are training with weight vests and some of the stuff where I'm just like, "I lifted weights too heavy when I was young and then I got elbow tendonitis. So I'm like, "The weight vest thing is just a little painful." I think there's pressure now to start when you're young and to be strong right away and to climb the same grade as your age. These goals that just seem kind of oppressive when you're a kid who just wants to go to the playground. But at the same time there's all these crazy strong little kids who seem to be having a blast, which is awesome. I think that they've received a lot of criticism, like, "Oh, they're just climbing routes that are meant for small fingers and it's because they're lighter. It's cool to see these young kids who are pulling off routes that ten or twenty years ago didn't seem possible to anyone, let alone an eleven year old. So I think that's the coolest evolution in the sport is to see the next generation and I'm still kind of the young generation but to see people so much younger than me that are really passionate about climbing.

Interviewer: Talking about the evolution of the sport makes me think too about how the reputation of the climbing in our area has developed over the years. We have high peaks, we have crags, but now Rocky Mountain National Park is really coming on people's radar for bouldering. Do you share that enthusiasm for bouldering up here?

Paige Claassen: I don't boulder very much, I've found that it's really hard on my body and I don't really enjoy it as much as sport climbing, but it's something that's really necessary for training and it's right here in my back yard. So I imagine this summer I'll probably spend more time in Rocky Mountain. One thing that was really cool when traveling all around the world, everyone in the world knows about Rocky Mountain National Park, but it's because of bouldering which is really interesting. Most of the climbers I was around were young; they were between fifteen and thirty-five, so they're kind of in this bouldering era. They are like, "Yeah, we know where Rocky Mountain National Park, that's where some of the hardest boulders are." It's interesting that among the younger generation, Estes is very well known but not because of its history. So there are cool parts to that but I think it's also important to recognize where we came from.

Interviewer: Yeah, wow that's really interesting. What do you say when they ask, "Have you climbed them?"

Paige Claassen: It would be more like, "Oh, where are you from?" And I would say, "I'm from Estes Park in Colorado," and everyone knew where Estes Park was from. To me like I grew up in this little mountain town of 7,000 people, but everyone knows it. So yeah, I'm proud of where I came from and that I do get to call this home and that my parents still live here and that I can

return here all the time and invite friends from all over the world to come to my home and enjoy the same experiences that we all get to enjoy as locals.

14:57

Interviewer: Do you have any idea of any issues with accessibility or impacts, are those becoming bigger problems, bigger discussions among your generation, are people concerned about it?

Paige Claassen: I definitely think access issues are huge right now and becoming a bigger and bigger problem that I think younger people are actually starting to recognize more. That's really cool to see people supporting the Access Fund and organizations who are trying to educate climbers on how to treat an area and to protect our existing areas and to help support future areas. That's something when I was traveling places around the world were trashed. I couldn't believe how much toilet paper was at the crag and it was kind of heart breaking. It makes you feel really fortunate for these organizations that we have here in the States that do clean up days. It's important to participate in those days where you're supporting your local areas and to also set an example as a climber because that's the best thing you can do. In a growing sport where new people are being introduced to climbing all the time and some of them, they don't know what's ok and what's safe or what's good for the environment. So to be an example is something really important. I think younger climbers are catching on to, especially as these organizations try and reach out to younger generations and get younger climbers on board to then reach out to their own generation.

Interviewer: Just a couple more questions. When you made that transition from indoor climbing to outdoor climbing and you started making friends who you could climb with outdoors and such, are there any differences between indoor and outdoor climbers?

Paige Claassen: I think there definitely are. I think when you come from the gym, hiking long approaches is less attractive. That's why Rifle is really attractive to a lot of gym climbers because it is a gym. You park in the parking lot and you go climbing right there. Whereas I think a lot of hard core outdoor climbers, they're like, "Oh, I did like two, three hour approaches or two or three day approaches." So there are big differences and I think that it's important for us all to learn from one another because I think the gym plays a very important role in preparing climbers for climbing outside, for training. But then outdoors of course play an important role in just having a healthy life style and enjoying what's all around us.

Interviewer: Are there any last stories you want to share?

Paige Claassen: I can't think of any. I feel like you asked really good questions.

Interviewer: Well thanks so much for doing this.

Paige Claassen: Yeah, that was fun, thank you.

18:34 [End of Part C. End of Interview.]

Note: Added material appears in brackets.

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ABSTRACT: Internationally recognized female climber Paige Claassen was raised in Estes Park and represents a transitional newer climbing generation who first mastered climbing through the indoor gym experience and then transitioned to outdoor sport climbing. Even as a self-motivated climber, Paige pays tribute to support from her family, coaches, and the legacy of earlier generations of climbers. Paige shares her thoughts about gym climbing competitions, how the climbing experience is a metaphor applicable to many life challenges, and the appropriateness of falling as a climber extends their climbing skill set. Paige reflects upon her appreciation for the aesthetics of different climbing locations. As a sponsored climber, Paige uses her notoriety to benefit different philanthropic, environmental and other cause based non-profits. As an accomplished athlete, Ms. Claassen has the future goals of exploring the genres of gear climbing and route development.

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